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Ian C. Willis

University of Wollongong, iwillis@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The paper examines a series of land releases by land developer Neil McLean on his farm St Elmo at Campbelltown between 1949 and 1961, which eventually formed a concentric ring around the old town centre. McLean was prescient in his understanding of the needs of Sydney's growth well before the Cumberland County Council designated Campbelltown as a satellite city in 1960. His vision and foresight put into action what the founders of the county plan envisaged as part of Sydney's metropolitan rural-urban fringe well before it happened on the city's urban frontier.

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A new horizon on Sydney's urban frontier: the St Elmo land releases

Ian Willis

Journalist Jeff McGill recently wrote an opinion piece in the *Campbelltown Macarthur Advertiser* with the heading 'Nothing "yucky" about fibro cottages'. He continued that 'Macarthur's first big housing development was Campbelltown's St Elmo Estates of the 1950s, guided by Neil McLean, a much-loved developer'.¹ The McLean St Elmo land releases were an exercise in urban place making under the post-war influence of the County of Cumberland Plan and a change point in the history of a country town. The McLean story is characterised by a number of firsts in Campbelltown's urban growth and the continuity of a number of factors that are still present today. During the years of the McLean project the town doubled in size and triggered the re-making of place based on the lived experience of ex-servicemen and their families. Their stories of place changed the rural landscape around their cultural traditions, social organisations, familial and interpersonal networks and their desires and expectations for a new start after the horrors of war. The new arrivals created a new narrative based on their status as outsiders in a frontier of fibro and weatherboard under the influence of post-war austerity and modernism.

The McLean St Elmo housing estates were within the jurisdiction of the County of Cumberland Plan, which was the first attempt at comprehensive town planning in New South Wales. In the post-war years the States' reconstruction needs raised the question of regional planning and, according to Ashton and Freestone, post-war planning was driven by two processes: the rationalisation of local government by the McKell Labor

Government; and the formation of the Cumberland County Council established under the provisions of the *Local Government (Town and Country Planning) Amendment Act* 1945, 'which enabled councils to prepare comprehensive local planning schemes for the first time'.² The County of Cumberland Planning Scheme was released in 1948 and gazetted in 1951, with 'land use zoning, suburban employment zones, open space acquisitions, and the green belt to Sydney'.³ The plan was ultimately designed to drive the growth of Sydney, including the Campbelltown area, which was a designated growth centre.⁴ A satellite city would, according to Denis Winston, 'provide useful alternatives to Sydney as residential locations for the ever-growing populations of the County' and reduce urban sprawl.⁵ By 1960 Cumberland County Council had commissioned a report that called for Campbelltown to be developed as a satellite city to stop Sydney's urban sprawl and protect the planned county green belt.⁶

What follows is a case study of urban place making in a country town on Sydney's rural-urban fringe. While it is not the purpose of the paper to evaluate the success of the County of Cumberland Plan, Campbelltown's urban growth must be set in the context of Sydney's urbanisation in the post-war years as part of the county plan. The paper examines a series of land releases by land developer Neil McLean on his farm St Elmo at Campbelltown between 1949 and 1961, which eventually formed a concentric ring around the old town centre. McLean was prescient in his understanding of the needs of Sydney's growth well before the Cumberland County Council designated Campbelltown as a satellite city in 1960. His vision and foresight put into action what the founders of the county plan envisaged as part of Sydney's metropolitan rural-urban fringe well before it happened on the city's urban frontier. There has been interest in the topic of the rural-urban fringe by a range of scholars including geographers, sociologists, planners and architects, while historians have been more concerned with Sydney suburbs than the metropolitan fringe.⁷ This study uses an empirical methodology to draw together a number of primary sources, including interviews supplemented by contemporary newspaper reports with additional secondary sources drawn from Campbelltown local studies resources.

ST ELMO, A LANDSCAPE OF HOPES AND DREAMS

The McLean St Elmo land subdivisions were the first major urban land development in post-war Campbelltown, which had a population of 3000 in 1946 and by 1960 had grown to over 8000. The setting for the land releases was best described in 1960 by SJ Webb:

[the area is] pleasantly hilly and undulating ... surrounded by some of the most attractive countryside around Sydney ... The approaches to the town from almost every direction are most attractive ... It is sound agricultural land ... On nearing Campbelltown, in the journey from Sydney, the traveller feels that the dismal, endless suburbs of the outer city have been left behind, and that here, at last, is the country – country that is a pleasure to see. The road winds down through the gentle hills and the town appears at the most logical place, nestling comfortably amongst the hills, sheltered by them and enhanced by their proximity.⁸

Neil McLean originally took an interest in the St Elmo homestead and the 37-acre farm when he struck opposition to his expansion plans for his Linfield chicken hatchery, which he established in 1946 after discharge from the RAAF. McLean thought that St Elmo was an 'admirable' site, with potential for real estate development, and most importantly was available for lease with an option to purchase.⁹ Neil McLean and his wife Meryl found St Elmo homestead in a derelict state and, according to their grandson Greg Fisher, took over the house because they 'liked a challenge'.¹⁰ Built in the 1890s by Campbelltown identity JB Moore, the two-storey Victorian mansion commanded a hilltop location typical of large colonial homes across the Cumberland Plain. The house precinct included a coach house, stables, cow-bails, hen house and a flourishing orchard.¹¹

The McLeans moved into St Elmo in February 1947¹² and established Ronross Hatcheries, named after their two children, Ronald and Rosalind. McLean raised day-old chicks at the hatchery, which he sold across Sydney.¹³ In 1949 the Cumberland County Council rezoned the farm residential from its rural designation and, according to McLean, 'we closed the chicken business and purchased the property'.¹⁴

THE FIRST ST ELMO LAND RELEASE

McLean's first land release in 1949 consisted of 73 allotments and was located on the northern side of Campbelltown town centre. Over the following 12 years the McLean St Elmo land development project undertook six separate land releases totalling 850 blocks.¹⁵ McLean engaged surveyor, engineer and town planner Wallace E (Wal) Lewis of Concord to design and supervise the construction of the first and subsequent subdivisions.¹⁶ The aim of the first land release was to have 'cheap land and a fine home' given the demand for housing and the shortages of material and skilled labour.¹⁷ A promotion for the land release in the Woman's Day in 1950 stated:

People from Sydney's exclusive north shore are enthusiastic buyers of the high quality houses which Mr McLean is building ... Living at St Elmo is like being perpetually in a landscape painting. Neil McLean doesn't have to 'sell' St Elmo. Wonderful panoramic countryside as far as the eye can see does that for him.¹⁸

The estate was an early version of master-planned estates, which were to become common in Campbelltown many decades later. The development provided a high standard of modest housing with brick homes, sealed roads, kerbing and guttering, town water and sewerage for the first time in Campbelltown, where most streets were unsealed with no kerbs and guttering. The first formed road on the estate was Lilian Street, named after a McLean relative,¹⁹ followed by Clarice Crescent and Ruzac Streets²⁰ at a time when streets could be named after living people.

The land release attracted the local elite, including politicians, doctors, solicitors, clergy, builders and other professionals. Campbelltown storekeeper William (Bill) Bursill 'grasped the opportunity' and in a speculative venture purchased a number of blocks of land and commenced construction of a number of homes.²¹ Sales were slow and locals labelled it 'Snob's Hill' and 'McLean's Folly'.²² McLean later admitted that poor sales were not what he expected, and that 'Campbelltown was still regarded by many people as distant - "in the sticks"' - an issue which still plagues the Campbelltown area today. The 1952 recession added to McLean's woes and he was 'caught' with some unsold houses.²³

McLean's vision for his St Elmo land releases was constrained by shortages of materials and skilled tradesman in the post-war environment. In these circumstances the New South Wales government demanded modest housing and austerity in housing design and planning. Under the laws introduced in 1945, houses were limited to 1,250 square feet and there were fines for owners and builders who exceeded these size limits. A correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1946 reported that the housing shortage was the biggest problem facing the economy.²⁴

THE ST ELMO SPECIAL PURCHASE PLAN FOR AUSTRALIAN EX-SERVICEMEN

Burnt by slow sales and looking for a different vision for his land ventures, McLean turned his attention to his fellow ex-servicemen and their families, who were desperate for a new start and access to affordable housing. An enterprising McLean advertised that 'eligible Australian ex-servicemen' were able to purchase house and land under his 'St Elmo Special Purchase Plan for Australian Ex-Servicemen' for £80 deposit, including architect's fees, and pay between '£3/10/0 to £2/10/0 per week'. Once the ex-servicemen had paid a deposit, McLean transferred the land title to the purchaser allowing them to apply for a war-service loan and immediately start construction of their architect-designed house.²⁵ And according to Wal Lewis, who addressed the Campbelltown and Airds Historical Society in 1990, McLean had 'little trouble' with his 'promissory notes being honoured'.²⁶

McLean was probably correct in 1968 when he claimed that his special purchase plan was 'never equalled' by any other land developer²⁷ and there were certainly many people who were grateful to him. Amongst them was Ellen Pring who claimed he gave her family, and lots of others, 'the opportunity to own our home'²⁸ while fellow St Elmo resident Barbara Noble thought McLean's vision was a 'God send'.²⁹ In 1956 ex-serviceman Gordon Wallace and his wife thought that 'it was beyond [their] wildest dreams to get a house' in the St Elmo estate at Campbelltown, along with many other young families. Times were tough and 'houses were really scarce' and, according to Wallace, 'it was a new beginning with our own place to raise our children. It was really good to be by ourselves'. He had

served in the army during the war and had been part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. At the time, Wallace was living with his parents in Homebush where there were 13 people in a three-bedroom house.³⁰ Newly-weds John Noble and his wife Barbara, who were living in a flat in North Sydney, 'were very grateful' that they were able to move into their weatherboard house in 1958. Barbara recalls that 'it was a wonderful set up, McLean owning the land and having Donaldson as architect'.³¹

McLean engaged newly graduated Sydney architect James B Donaldson, who designed modest low cost 'austerity modern' homes, which were simple, modern, affordable cottages of two or three bedrooms, constructed of fibro or weatherboard.³² Donaldson stated:

The estate was aimed at people with War Service housing loans – War Service people would build, not sit on the land and speculate, and the estate would be more attractive with building going on. I prepared six basic house designs – L-shaped, ranch-style, double-fronted and so on, with a choice of hopper or sash windows, different types of roofs – which were used to help sell land. All the designs were cheap enough to build on a War Service loan. The government only lent \$5,500 [£2,750].

The estates were 85 per cent fibro and 85 per cent War Service. We sold out three estates in ten years. The designs were all about maximising space, which denied you the chance to do anything architectural. On the other hand, they were good houses to live in and the buyers were well satisfied.³³

Across Australia War Service homes were 9.8 per cent of all loans for new homes between 1945 and 1956.³⁴

McLean was the first to commodify Campbelltown's ruralness with promotions encouraging buyers to 'Be Healthy, Wealthy and Wise Decentralise!!' promising 'beautiful grassy, elevated blocks – views of undulating splendour for miles'.³⁵ This advertising mantra established a tradition that still typifies land releases in the Campbelltown area today with their appeal to open space and rural countryside. McLean's No 2 St Elmo estate was released for sale in 1953 offering 86 allotments with streets named after his family north of the town centre. There were those

named after himself, McLean Road, and his children, Rosalind Crescent and Ronald Street. Other family members were noted with a mention – Clark Street – while Mereil Street was created by joining the first names of Neil McLean and his wife, Meryl.³⁶

Sometimes the suburban dream that McLean initially offered to buyers at St Elmo came with little supporting infrastructure. The Nobles found no water connected to the house, with only a water pipe running up the street and much 'to-ing and fro-ing' getting water for the house. There was 'no landscaping in those days and the clay, with the winter and the rain was terrible'. They had to put on a rainwater tank, the road was unsealed and no kerbing or guttering.³⁷ Ellen Pring recalls that she and her husband Jack 'had no electricity and no water when we moved in'.³⁸ Eventually all services were connected. McLean admits that purchasers 'suffered inconvenience, unpleasant conditions' while on the other side of the coin, houses were supplied 'at far less cost'. The plan was 'one of mutual trust and respect'.³⁹

McLean ran his land releases from his office in Queen Street, Campbelltown and promised to pick up prospective buyers from the train on Sundays, which was just as well because a lot of them did not own motorcars.⁴⁰ Gordon Wallace did not own a car and worked as a carpenter on the Sydney wharves. When his family moved to Campbelltown he walked to the railway station after leaving home at 4.30am to catch the steam train to Liverpool, then change for the city-bound electric train.⁴¹ He was one of a number of men from the estate in a similar position, and occasionally they had to knock on the door of a neighbour to rouse them, so they did not miss the train. These men made up the core of the community organisations that appeared on the estate to provide mutual assistance to all new families.

McLean certainly understood how desperate his buyers were for a new start. Ex-serviceman Kevin Hoystead and his wife, June, were living in a flat at Ashfield in the mid-1950s when they purchased a house. They lived hand-to-mouth from one pay to the next unless the women were able to get work, or the men took a second and third job. Gordon Wallace took a job shovelling coal onto the ships at the wharves 'all night'. He did this to

ensure that his daughter Anne was educated, much to the disgust of his own family and their attitude that 'she was only a girl'.⁴² June Hoystead was able to get a local job in Campbelltown on weekends that helped the family's ends meet,⁴³ while Ena McMillan found secretarial work.⁴⁴

In the mid-1950s McLean's promotion carried images that boasted about Campbelltown modernism and the facilities that it offered, including modern baby-health centre, shops, employment, parks, churches, bus transport and modern architect-designed homes of the latest building materials – asbestos fibro. While the advertisements stated that Campbelltown was one hour from Sydney on the train, the weekly fare was only 14/6d.⁴⁵ McLean's advertising promotions promised and boasted about 'the available pool of skills of our people, the favourable terms negotiated with our Council, the railway facilities and Campbelltown's relation to the Cities of Sydney and Wollongong'.⁴⁶ By 1956 over 600 families had taken up McLean's offer with the 'ultra-modern homes' being supplied with water, electricity, sewerage and sealed roads.⁴⁷

McLean opened up four additional land releases on the southern side of the Campbelltown centre after his efforts to purchase the 'Warby Paddock' adjacent to the first two land releases failed. The first blocks in the southern development went on sale in 1955 with St Elmo Estates No 3, followed by Nos 4, 5 and 6. The eastern boundary of the land releases was Wedderburn Road, which follows the Upper Georges River, and was a 'rutted dirt track' according to Jeff McGill.⁴⁸ McLean demolished the 1822 two-storey Georgian mansion Bradbury Park House built by Campbelltown identity William Bradbury, which was the oldest standing building in Campbelltown at the time. In 1941 JF Morris claimed the house had sweeping vistas from its hilltop location with the house precinct made up a quadrangle of kitchen and servants' quarters, stables, granary and barn, reminiscent of an English-style village.⁴⁹

The St Elmo Estate No 3 Estate was released in three stages, according to Wal Lewis: stage one in 1955 with 386 blocks; stage two in 1957 with 16; and stage three in 1961 with 20. In 1957 Estate No 4 was released with 121 blocks along with Estate No 6 with 148 allotments for sales. In 1961 Estate No 5, which included Guise and Allott Streets and extended to

what was called Macquarie Heights and later became Bradbury in 1969, was sold and subdivided by Civil and Civic Constructions which later became Lend Lease Homes.⁵⁰ The final McLean land release was earmarked in 1959. It failed to eventuate and the land was sold to Lend Lease Corporation. Lend Lease developed the Sherwood Hills land releases during the 1960s, as an early form of a master-planned estate with underground electricity, no front fences and a band of red tiled roofs, mirroring some aspects of McLean's first St Elmo land release.

McLean maintained that Campbelltown was an ideal location for the place-making efforts of the new arrivals where there was 'a community interested in human relations, and aspirations, where one neighbour is indeed neighbourly, where one has a feeling of belonging - sharing - and contributing'.⁵¹ Ex-service personnel and new St Elmo arrivals Lance and Elsie Evans certainly set about creating new social networks in their new community in 1958. Elsie and Lance Evans moved into St Elmo in 1957 after renting a flat at Neutral Bay. Elsie maintained 'We gradually settled in to the area, playing tennis at St Peter's Church and working in the canteen at the school'. Elsie joined the school's Mothers' Club which organised a number of social events for the new community. Elsie felt that the area 'was like a village, it was country life, the shopkeepers all knew you ... we would all help each other out because we had all moved away from family'.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The arrival of Sydney's urban frontier at Campbelltown created a landscape of hopes and dreams where land developer Neil McLean was both a change-maker and place-maker. In his terms he was a 'pioneer'⁵³ who was responsible for a number of firsts in Campbelltown around his St Elmo land releases between 1949 and 1961, which encouraged the growth of a small community of around 4,000 people.⁵⁴ McLean put together the first developer-funded land release in the Campbelltown area with house and land packages that provided architect-designed cottages to ex-servicemen. His development, the first of its kind in the area, marked the gradual merging of Campbelltown with Sydney's rural-urban fringe under the County of Cumberland Plan.

McLean was a complex character, an ex-serviceman with an enterprising streak for making money and helping his fellow war veterans. He fulfilled a number of roles at St Elmo: developer, mentor, and philanthropist - a bit like a generous uncle. The St Elmo purchasers felt indebted to McLean for his vision and entrepreneurship through generous sale conditions on house and land packages. The post-war years were marked by the 'austerity modern' with constant shortages of materials and skilled workers, where a young Sydney architect James Donaldson rose to meet the challenges of modernism in the suburbs. Today Campbelltown subdivisions are typified by the excesses of McMansions in master-planned estates. Under the guise of neo-liberalism marketisation, rent-seeking land developers leave the area once they have made their sales targets. McLean was a complete contrast to Campbelltown's land developers of today.

Campbelltown's St Elmo community became a stage where new actors played out their life story, with a new start after the tragedy and misery of war. Their place-making story produced a narrative about re-shaping the urban space in Campbelltown, as the town was re-classified as a satellite city as part of the Cumberland County Council for the first time. McLean's promotions for the St Elmo land releases were the first commodification of the area's rurality and ruralness, where outsiders came looking for the open spaces in the countryside. The St Elmo land developments marked the end of the country town of Campbelltown under the influence of modernism and the county plan. Shortly after this period Campbelltown Council built the first office tower in the area and by 1968 Campbelltown was gazetted as a city and the electrification of the Sydney's suburban railway network reached Campbelltown. The provision of public transport in the 1950s for the new arrivals posed challenges for those who did not own a motorcar, while adequate public transport still remains an issue today.

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